

Posted on Fri, Nov. 25, 2005

U.S. leadership isn't a sure thing

PELOSI RIGHTLY PRODS CONGRESS TO GET MOVING ON AN 'INNOVATION AGENDA' TO SECURE AMERICA'S FUTURE

Mercury News Editorial

Tech luminaries, academics, researchers and business leaders have been sounding alarm bells about America's eroding competitiveness in science and technology for more than a year.

In study after study, groups such as the Council on Competitiveness, the National Academies, TechNet and AeA explained the problems in clear and stark terms. The rise of tech powerhouses in China, India and elsewhere, and the parallel decline at home in math and science education, in research and development investments, and in broadband infrastructure, have put America's economic leadership and prosperity at risk. These groups also provided sensible, detailed and often strikingly similar solutions to ensure America remains No. 1.

In Washington, however, it all seemed to fall on deaf ears. Until now.

Last week, House Democrats unveiled a competitiveness policy agenda that drew heavily from these reports. Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco, said she would push for legislation to ensure universal access to broadband, to establish 100,000 new scholarships for scientists, mathematicians and engineers, to increase federal funding for basic science and technology research and to achieve energy independence within 10 years.

The proposal was drafted with substantial input from Bay Area lawmakers, including Reps. George Miller of Concord, Zoe Lofgren of San Jose and Anna Eshoo of Palo Alto. It is the first comprehensive congressional proposal that begins to address the challenges of a world in which Chinese universities graduate 10 times as many engineers as their American counterparts, in which salaries for engineers in India are a tenth of what they are here and in which American 12th-graders perform near the bottom in math and science among advanced nations.

Turning this sweeping proposal into legislation will not be easy. Democrats don't control the agenda, and few in a polarized Congress are inclined to reach across the aisle. In fact, Republican leaders pooh-poohed Pelosi's proposal moments after it was unveiled. Perhaps they fear that by admitting America faces a problem that surfaced on their watch, they'll be blamed for it.

Whatever the reason, their rejection of the proposal does a disservice to America. It puts partisanship and short-term thinking ahead of the nation's future.

Both Democrats and Republicans need to stand for something positive going into next year's election, something that addresses the growing fear of middle-class voters that their children won't enjoy the same opportunities that they've had. Unless Congress adopts legislation to restore America's competitive edge, those fears will be warranted.

The Democrats' "Innovation Agenda" is online at www.house.gov/pelosi/press/releases/Nov05/innovation.html.